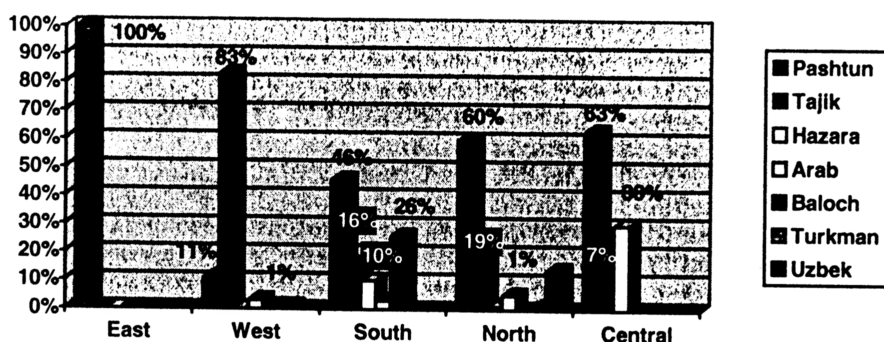
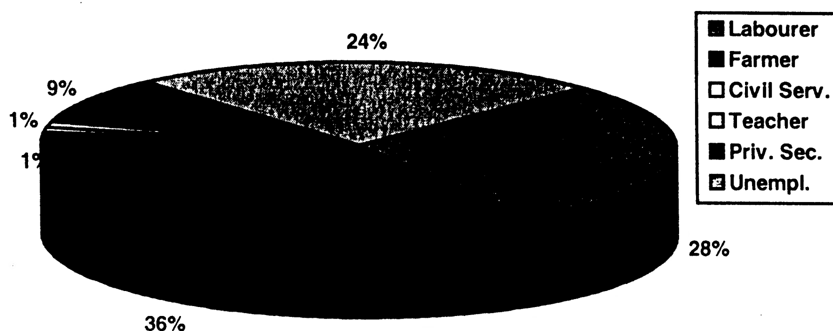


Occupation profile of returnees

A profile of the occupation of returnees after return indicates a declining number of returnees who generate income in Afghanistan as farmers or with animal husbandry (36%), while as many as 28% work as daily labourers and a proportion of as many as 24% are without regular income (unemployed). This is an area in which UNHCR and other agencies will - in the year 2001 - strengthen their efforts in facilitating reintegration by assisting income-generation through micro-credit schemes and skills training. The proportion of returnees generating income directly through farming and/or animal husbandry is higher among returnees from Pakistan (40%) than from Iran (31%) while the larger number of returnees without any regular source of income are found among those returning from Iran (34%) than from Pakistan (15%).

Occupation Profiles of returnees after return



Years in exile

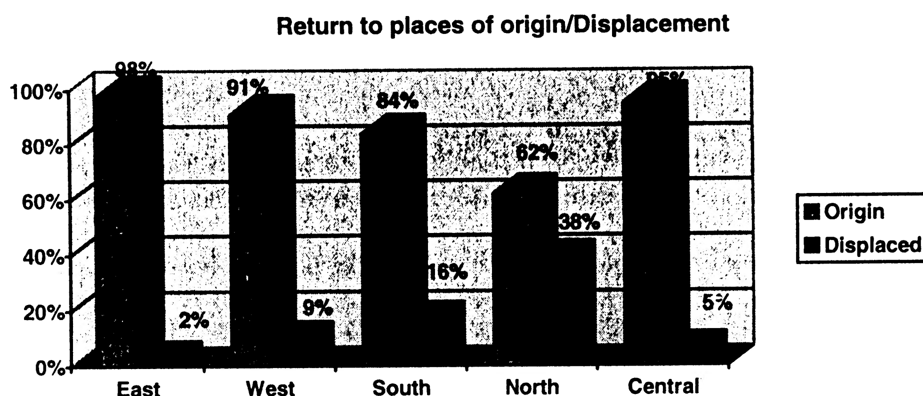
The large majority of the returnees interviewed by UNHCR returned to Afghanistan after more than 16 years in exile in Iran or Pakistan. While only 34% of the returnees stayed less then 5 years abroad, 32% of the returnees returned after 16-20 years of living in Iran and Pakistan. There is a marked difference between the returnees from Pakistan and those from Iran in as far as the majority of returnees from Pakistan have spent 15 years and more in exile (59%), while a large majority of the returnees from Iran have spent less than 10 years in exile in Iran (58% between 1 and 5 years and 19% between 6 and 10 years). While most of the returnees from Iran therefore have a direct comparison between conditions in Iran and in Afghanistan, the majority of the returnees from Pakistan, namely children, will be seeing their places of origin for the first time.

Return to places of Origin/Displacement

Of the returnees interviewed in 1999 in the Southern 77%, in the Eastern region 95%, in the Central region 99%, in the Northern region 87% were able to return to their places of origin in Afghanistan. In the Western region, however, where many deportees were among those interviewed, only 41% were able to return to their places of origin within the first few months after their return. Of the interviewed returnees in 2000, 88% have been able to return to their places of origin or former habitual residence in Afghanistan while 12% of the families could not do so for various reasons: due to the lack of security in their areas of origin, due to the shortage or lack of water for agricultural purposes in their areas of origin

and in some cases because the returnees have owned no property (house or land) and therefore feel that economic opportunities are better elsewhere than at their places of previous residence in Afghanistan. The highest proportion of returnees who were unable to return to their places of origin or previous residence among those interviewed was found in the Northern region (38% of those interviewed), where the security situation remains volatile in some and internal displacement as a result of drought is observed within districts and from districts to urban areas in search of employment opportunities. 1% of interviewed returnees, mostly Hazaras in Western region, are not feeling secure themselves, 11% of the returnees are facing problems with landmines or unexploded ordinance in their areas of return, namely on agricultural land which has not been cleared.

Return to places of origin/Displacement



Recovery of immovable property

Of the returnees interviewed up to October 2000, 42% were able to recover their immovable properties such as land and houses which they or their families owned prior to the flight. 41% of the returnees found their houses completely destroyed, while 5% have not been able to reclaim their previous property, mainly those who felt or were not able to return to their places of origin. An increasing proportion of the returnees is landless (13% in total) and found to be staying with relatives or in rented houses. Among the returnees from Iran, there is a slightly higher proportion of returnees who are landless (15%) than among those returning from Pakistan (11%).

Access to basic social services

55% of the interviewed returnee families have access to health services in reachable distance from their residences, while as many as 45% do not have access to any kind of health services, neither mobile nor a permanent doctor or clinic in their areas of return. Access to health care is higher among the returnees in the Western and Northern region than among the returnees in the Eastern and Central region. It is worth noting that only 69% of the returnee families has access to potable water, a situation which will most likely deteriorate even further due to the prevailing drought in Afghanistan.

Only 21% of the interviewed families have one or more school-age children (6 to 18 years of age) attending public school, home-based school or receiving basic education in a madrasa or mosque, while 79% of the families do not have any of their children at school. Of those 21% who have one or more children receiving primary education, only 13% of the families have one or more of their girls attending school. The reasons for this low rate of attendance of schools are the lack of schools in the area of return (not even for boys); economic problems requiring children to support the family; the lack of qualified teachers or lack of teaching materials, and, in some cases, the restrictive attitude of the Taliban authorities with regard to formal education of girls.

Through the returnee monitoring, UNHCR has – in addition to generating reliable information necessary to undertake reintegration assistance – been able to raise awareness, both among returnees and the local authorities, of the guarantees contained in the Declaration of Amnesties, issued by both the Taliban and the Northern Alliance in 1997. Of particular importance are provisions of non-discrimination of returnees on the basis of ethnic origin, religious group or gender as well as exemption of returnees from recruitment for a period of one year after return which have proven and continue to prove a basis for dialogue with the local authorities on the rights of returnees.

In addition, the feedback received from returnees about their motivation to return, the situation in countries of asylum as well as their perspective about the situation at their places of origin has been valuable with a view to provide information to refugees in these countries of asylum as well as to UNHCR Iran and Pakistan. It is indicative of the deteriorating situation in both countries of asylum that an increasing number of returnees cite difficulties faced in Iran and Pakistan as their main reason for returning to Afghanistan. This trend is likely to continue in 2001 and poses a serious challenge for UNHCR and the assistance community in Afghanistan for which an increased presence in Afghanistan and in areas of refugee return and access to returnees are an essential pre-condition.

Reintegration assistance: For the past several years, UNHCR's support for the reintegration of returnees has been chronically hampered by lack of sufficient funds as well as late contributions to the repatriation programme. Given the climatic conditions in Afghanistan, repatriation takes place mainly during May and June and almost ceases by October. Many returnees require assistance in rebuilding their shelter before the onset of winter. Support for repatriation and reintegration, therefore, should be made available as early as possible in the year. In 2000, the volume of assistance to address the immediate needs of returnees during an initial phase of reintegration, namely assistance for the construction or rehabilitation of shelter as well as the provision of safe potable water, was 40% less than in 1999, despite increased numbers of returnees. Reasons for this reduced volume of reintegration assistance were the limitations of available funds as well as the high additional cost for in-country transportation provided to returnees from Iran returning under the Joint Programme. Funds available for UNHCR's programme in Afghanistan have not been increased or changed for the past few years and stand at about US$ 5,000,000, while the number of returnees has drastically increased from about 100,000 to over 200,000 persons this year. It is expected that the same or higher number of returnees may repatriate to Afghanistan next year. Unless the funds for (reintegration-) assistance programmes in Afghanistan increase, returnees will only find extremely limited reintegration assistance at their places of return, the sustainability of return will become increasingly questionable and renewed departures to neighbouring countries might often be the only available option for survival for an increasing number of returnees.

Following the decision of the Thematic Group for the Return of Refugees in September 2000, UNHCR will undertake further efforts to promote integrated approaches to assistance for returnee reintegration, aimed at a greater division of responsibility among a variety of assistance actors, both UN-agencies and NGOs. While UNHCR will continue to increasingly focus on the protection of returnees and returnee monitoring activities, it remains engaged, as a priority, in addressing the immediate needs of returnees during an initial phase after return, such as shelter reconstruction and improvement of existing potable water systems. In addition, it is foreseen to continue the provision of a repatriation assistance package for returnees from Iran and Pakistan, in a standardised form for returnees from both countries.

Encouraged by the revised strategy for refugee return by the thematic group, other assistance agencies are expected to be increasingly involved in reintegration assistance for returnees from the year 2001 onwards in a coordinated and integrated manner. In this spirit, UNDP's P.E.A.C.E. II initiative, which will be launched in 2001, already foresees the inclusion of assistance for the reintegration of returnees as one of the three sub-programmes of the initiative. This inclusion will significantly enhance the participation in assistance to returnees of UNDP partners such as UNOPS/arrp, UNOPS/cdap, FAO and HABITAT. UNHCR will play a major role in P.E.A.C.E. II as

a strategic partner as well as the lead agency of its returnee reintegration sub-programme. Since 1998, UNHCR has already been engaged in community-based integrated reintegration assistance such as in the Joint Reintegration Programme for Azra and Tezin, and Greater Azra Initiative. Since this approach has proved to more effectively address the needs of returnees, UNHCR will attempt to continue, within the framework of the PEACE II initiative, the same approach in other geographical areas of high refugee return.

To further promote an integrated approach to returnee reintegration, UNHCR will make a major effort to improve the capacity and efficiency of information sharing with other assistance agencies in 2001. UNHCR will encourage other UN agencies and NGOs, particularly specialised in the provision of social services (health and education) and support for sustainable livelihoods with a longer term development perspective to participate in the returnee reintegration assistance in 2001, which will contribute to minimising UNHCR' involvement in sectors in which UNHCR is not specialised in and for which the organisation has no resources. However, there will still remain some sectors in which UNHCR will continue to provide limited assistance. These are, medical care for returnees upon crossing the border as well as en route to their destination, pilot-projects for small-scale income-generation, to increase opportunities for vulnerable caseloads among urban returnees who have no agricultural land nor any other sources of income and no access to assistance of other agencies. For educational assistance to returnees, UNHCR will attempt to mobilise more support from other agencies, by actively providing the required information on returnee children. In sectors related to agriculture, rehabilitation of infrastructure, and other sectors important for securing sustainable livelihoods, UNHCR will continue to mobilise the support of other agencies (UN and NGOs) particularly within the framework of the P.E.A.C.E. II Initiative as well as donors, inter alia, by sharing information generated through returnee monitoring.

Out of the expected programme funds for 2001 of US$ 4.500,000, UNHCR foresees the need to allocate 50% to provision of shelter to address the needs of 30% of the expected returnee families, assuming that 200,000 Afghan refugees will opt to return to Afghanistan next year. Both an increase in the number of returnees as well as any decrease in available funds will result in enormous constraints for returnees to settle in their home country. To standardise the level of assistance to returnees in all regions of Afghanistan and to maximise the efficiency of the use of funds, funds for shelter assistance to returnees will be allocated to each region in proportion to the expected number of returnees. Based on this year's statistics, 18.1% of all returnees returned to the Eastern region, 32.9% to Central region, 11.5% to Northern, 5.6% to Southern, and 31.9% to Western region.

UNHCR wishes to underline that protection of returnees pre-supposes access to them and access to returnees is closely linked to the ability of agencies, including UNHCR to address identified needs and provide

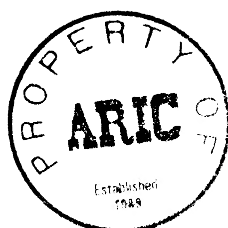
Co-operation with other agencies: Under the framework of the Greater Azra Initiative (GAI) and in the franework of the Principled Common Programming, co-operation with other agencies has substantially increased and improved in the past several years, and within this framework, UNHCR has established strong partnership with UNDP, UNOPS, FAO, WHO, WFP, UNESCO, UNICEF, UNDCP, UNOCHA, DACAAR, CARE, IRC, ISRA, AG BAS and many other Afghan NGOs. With such partnerships, UNHCR and, most importantly, returnees have benefited from those agencies' expertise and resources, and thus community-based integrated reintegration assistance was made possible. This, in turn, made it possible for

UNHCR to allocate more resources to its core mandated protection functions. In 2001, UNHCR will further enhance its partnership and co-operation with other assistance agencies through P.E.A.C.E. II as well as Greater Azra Initiative III. UNHCR views this direction as paving the way to better and efficient allocation of resources, not only of UNHCR, but of the assistance community as a whole.

(UNHCR, November 2000)

Return of Refugees from Neighbouring Countries

Background Note
for the Afghan Support Group Meeting
Montreux, 7 and 8 December 2000





United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

Afghanistan Support Group Meeting
Montreux, 7 and 8 December 2000

Background Note

Return of Refugees from Neighbouring Countries to Afghanistan
prepared by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

This note summarises UNHCR operations in the two main countries of asylum of Afghan refugees, Pakistan and Iran, as well as in the country of origin, Afghanistan. It outlines the objectives and activities of UNHCR and highlights key opportunities, trends and constraints with regard to the identification of durable solutions to the problems of Afghan refugee and returnees

Pakistan

Background: Pakistan, although not signatory to the **1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees**, continued to grant asylum to Afghan refugees who arrived prior to 1998 on a *prima facie* basis. However, since 1998 Pakistan requires that Afghans have valid travel documents to enter Pakistan. This provision has been enforced in an ad hoc manner, and de facto it has been used to prevent the entry of minority group members, particularly in Baluchistan. On 9 November 2000 the government decided to suddenly close the official border crossing point at Torkham in NWFP. The reasons for the closure were explained as being based on lack of adequate assistance from the international community to continue to shelter the burden of the influx. Furthermore the government also expressed its concern about the consequences of the developments to national security as well as indicating that a number of those arriving are fleeing for reasons more related to the drought than the conflict. Since then the border has been opened and closed on several occasions, and an agreement has been reached between the Taliban and the GOP to "regulate" border crossings, whereby Afghans who had established their residence in Pakistan are allowed to travel while Afghans seeking refuge for the first time are not allowed to approach the border.

UNHCR is very concerned about the situation of asylum-seekers who are unable to avail themselves of international protection. Discussions with the Government of Pakistan are ongoing with a view to solving this problem. While regretting this sudden new development UNHCR also recognizes the burden on Pakistan of sheltering the largest refugee caseload in the world for over twenty years and the inadequate level of support from the international community. Afghan refugees in Pakistan enjoy the protection of the Pakistani government, and their basic rights of freedom of movement and access to work are guaranteed. There are at present some 1.2 million Afghan refugees living in refugee villages, mainly in NWFP and Balochistan Provinces, plus an undetermined number (estimates ranges from between one to two million) Afghans living in urban areas in the main cities throughout Pakistan.

Objectives for UNHCR's operation in Pakistan regarding Afghan refugees are the following:

- To facilitate the voluntary repatriation of those refugees who so desire, including the mobilisation of assistance inside Afghanistan for returning groups.
- To ensure appropriate protection and assistance to newly arrived refugees. This increasingly includes addressing the needs and concerns of the minority Afghan populations both with regard to access and assistance.
- To increase self-reliance among the refugees, including mobilisation of a larger representation of the community, i.e. women, the youth and the elderly, through the provision of limited community based assistance.
- To ensure a rapid response and adequate protection measures for Afghan women-at-risk and security cases.

Protection: Pakistan has for years been accommodating hundreds of thousands of Afghan refugees of whom probably over two million are still in the country. However, with the recent decision on the closure of the border the key protection problem will be the continuing dialogue on access for refugees to the country. Any adequate solution to this important issue will also depend on the reaction and response by the international community as well as consultations in Afghanistan. A further issue of concern to UNHCR relates to the situation of the increasing population of Afghan

minorities in the country who in many cases cannot benefit in the same way from the support mechanisms existing for the majority group. Furthermore UNHCR continues to examine cases of those individuals who do not feel adequately secure in Pakistan linked to their civilian activities in Afghanistan and in particular for a number of women generally educated of urban background who have no traditional family support. UNHCR resorts to resettlement of these refugees to third countries, or when feasible and appropriate, relocation within Pakistan.

Assistance: In line with UNHCR's policy priorities, substantial progress has been made in recent years to address the particular needs of children, adolescents and women in refugee villages related to the provision of quality primary education and primary health care, including water and sanitation. WFP assistance through the provision of edible oil to encourage girls' school attendance has been very useful. Since 1996, the number of refugee girls attending school has tripled. Environment conservation is part of the school curriculum. Reproductive health has been strengthened in close collaboration with UNFPA. The planned phase-out of a number of key UNHCR partners is a serious concern.

New Arrivals: Although Afghans have not been considered prima facie refugees since 1998 and the borders are officially closed, prior to 2000 there has been a limited but steady flow of refugees arriving in Pakistan, mostly through Torkham in NWFP and some through Chaman in Baluchistan. This year the number of new arrivals started to increase significantly in June and rose dramatically in October and November with some 47,000 by the end of November. Many of them are Tajiks, mainly from Takhar and Parwan, Uzbeks and Hazaras and some Pashtuns. Their movement has been triggered often by a combination of war and drought. In NWFP they settle in Akora Khattak and New Shamshatoo where they are assisted by UNHCR, WFP, the Government of Pakistan and a number of NGOs.

Voluntary Repatriation: The majority of Afghans living in refugee villages in Pakistan are of Pashtun origin, and are of rural background. As such, they share a number of cultural values with the Taliban, and many come from areas presently controlled by the Taliban. Although conditions in Afghanistan are not yet conducive to a general repatriation movement, many refugees request UNHCR's assistance to return. UNHCR therefore facilitates the repatriation of those refugees who voluntarily decide to go back to Afghanistan. Through discussions, interviews with and screening of Afghans who express their intention to return, where possible including with female refugees, UNHCR attempts to ensure that the return is strictly voluntary, of a peaceful nature and the intention of the refugees is to remain in Afghanistan. UNHCR believes that the development of a significant set of activities inside Afghanistan to ensure the reintegration of returnees, in addition to monitoring schemes, may increase the number of returning refugees considerably and for the year 2001 is currently estimating a number of 100,000 Afghan refugees to return from Pakistan. Their return might, in the long run, contribute to the change of conditions inside Afghanistan, as returnees are likely to expect access to services available in Pakistan, especially education and health (including for girls and women). In 2000 UNHCR has assisted close to 75,000 refugees to return and has been forced to turn down significant numbers of applicants due to insufficient funding for this operation.

Iran

Background: Iran is a signatory to the 1951 Convention relating to the status of refugees. Until 1992 refugee residence permits were granted on a *prima facie* basis to all Afghans arriving in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Thereafter all new arrivals were no longer granted the same right to reside in the Islamic Republic of Iran, thus creating a large group of hundreds of thousands of unregistered Afghans considered by the Iranian authorities to be illegal aliens in Iran and thus not entitled to protection. An exception was made in 1995 when the Government accepted to give temporary residence permits to around half a million Afghans as an ad hoc measure in view of their expected imminent repatriation. These residence permits have expired in 1996 with the result that those temporary card holders who had not repatriated are also considered to be illegal aliens in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Recent estimates provided by the Government indicate that 1.482.000 Afghans have been registered and have obtained residence permits some of which have since expired. According to the same source, there would be 500.000 unregistered and undocumented foreigners in Iran, the majority being Afghans. Documented Afghans are permitted to reside in the Islamic Republic of Iran and are allowed to apply for work permits. However, obtaining the required work permits is extremely difficult and are given exceptionally. As a result the majority of Afghans in Iran work illegally. The protection situation of Afghans in Iran is steadily deteriorating due to a changed general attitude as a result of difficult economic conditions and rising unemployment. The Ministry of Interior has found itself under increasing pressure from other Ministries, the Parliament and public opinion to take measures to force all Afghans to leave Iran.

Iran has rightly been praised for its generous asylum policy but has now reached a point where "asylum fatigue" is increasing. This sense of frustration results from a feeling that there is no end in sight for a refugee problem entering its third decade. The Afghans are often portrayed and perceived as an excessive social, economic and security burden for the nation while support or burden-sharing by the international community is seen as dwindling. This perception has resulted in increasing material protection vulnerability in particular for the vast majority of Afghans living outside of camps.

UNHCR's Objectives in Iran. In this rapidly changing Iranian environments objectives for UNHCR's operation in The Islamic Republic of Iran regarding Afghans are the following:

- Facilitate voluntary repatriation of Afghans wherever feasible. For 2001 the planning figure for UNHCR assisted voluntary repatriation is 100.000 persons.
- Ensure that a mechanism is put in place that will allow genuine refugees to be identified through a transparent and fair procedure and to be protected if found to be eligible.
- Continue to assist Afghan refugees: giving priority to support in education and health; foster increased self-reliance for refugees living outside of camps, pending voluntary repatriation.
- Develop new partnerships with national and international NGOs and specialised UN agencies to enhance refugee care and raise awareness of refugee problems among institutions and in civil society at large.

Protection: The Islamic Republic of Iran was considered to be a safe country of asylum for those refugees who possess residence permits granted by the relevant authorities and not for the several hundred thousand Afghans who have not been

able to have their case examined. In 2001 the situation is likely to change. A new law has recently been introduced according to which it is no longer the residence permit that guarantees a stay in Iran but a valid work permit. The law also mentions the possibility of stay in Iran to those whose lives are in danger. It is still not clear how this will be assessed. In 2000 the introduction of a Joint UNHCR/Government of Iran programme that identified Afghans in need of protection amongst the group of undocumented Afghans did significantly decrease the number of deportations of undocumented Afghans compared to the massive forced returns that had taken place in 1998 and 1999. In parallel to the screening process around 130.000 Afghans voluntarily repatriated to certain areas of Afghanistan under a UNHCR assisted return programme. However UNHCR still views the situation with serious concern as recent developments indicate that the overall protection of Afghan refugees in Iran could easily significantly deteriorate even further in the near future. In order to ensure protection to genuine refugees the focus of UNHCR activities in 2001 and coming years will have to be identification of the Afghans in need of protection amongst the much larger number of migrants currently in Iran. Efforts will have to be made to increase the quality of asylum while at the same time assisting the Government to deal with the huge problems of large numbers of Afghans entering its territory for a variety of motives often unrelated to refugee movements. Although it is not anticipated that the Joint Programme for the Voluntary repatriation of Afghans will continue in its present form beyond 2000, it is assumed that the voluntary repatriation of Afghans will continue and UNHCR has adopted a planning figure of 100.000 returnees for 2001. In parallel UNHCR will be exploring the possibility of maintaining some elements of the joint screening mechanism including for the new arrivals in provinces bordering Afghanistan.

Assistance: A very small portion (less than five per cent) of the documented Afghan refugees in the Islamic Republic of Iran lives in 7 designated camps, the rest is scattered throughout the country, largely in provinces bordering with Afghanistan and Pakistan as well as major urban centres. Taking into account the increased material vulnerability of refugees, in particular those outside camps due to economic difficulties and in parallel to continued camp assistance, UNHCR's focus is on developing measures through integrated small-scale community projects and micro-credit schemes to reduce dependency and fostering self-reliance pending repatriation. Particular attention will be given in 2001 to developing programmes for Afghans recognised as being in need of protection under the Joint Programme and any follow-up screening mechanism. In line with the country objective, assistance for non-camp refugees in education and health care sector has been increased with special emphasis on women, children and adolescents' needs, additional activities are planned for the year 2001. WFP project "Oil for girls' education" has encouraged girls' school attendance. Reproductive health projects has been initiated in collaboration with UNFPA in the refugee impacted areas. Co-operation is also underway with UNDCP in developing joint projects on drugs prevention and awareness among the refugee community. The absence of a legal framework for NGOs to operate in Iran, continues to be an impediment to project implementation.

New arrivals: In the past years there has been a steady flow of Afghans arriving in the Islamic Republic of Iran. In practice, despite the establishment of a screening process, most new arrivals have not had the opportunity to have their cases examined to determine their refugee status and therefore have not been able to obtain any formal protection in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Voluntary repatriation: Around 130.000 Afghans have benefited from a UNHCR assisted voluntary repatriation programme The Afghans returning consisted mainly

of Tajiks, Pashtuns and some Hazaras returning mostly to Herat and Kabul. Despite the increasing pressures to expel all Afghans from Iran, the repatriation operation did contribute to the general improvement of protection of Afghans in the Islamic Republic of Iran and resulted in a major decrease (an estimated 8-10.000 in 2000 compared to over 100.000 in 1999) in the earlier trend of indiscriminate forcible returns of mainly undocumented Afghans that had been a regular feature in the Islamic Republic of Iran for the past few years. In this steadily deteriorating protection regime, through the Joint programme UNHCR has managed to discourage the Government from taking more drastic measures that would have resulted in massive forced deportations to Afghanistan. It is therefore essential to maintain the achieved results and continue a modest voluntary repatriation to pre-empt a rapid deterioration of the general protection situation. At the same time UNHCR will have to continue focusing on encouraging the establishment of a refugee eligibility determination procedure in order to address the problems of Afghan refugees in need of protection.

Afghanistan

Background: Voluntary repatriation of Afghan refugees from Iran and Pakistan has began, on a large scale, immediately after the fall of the Soviet backed communist government of Afghanistan in 1992. After 1992, repatriation levels began decreasing gradually with some 87,000 refugees returning in 1997, some 104,000 in 1998 (with 93,000 persons returning from Pakistan) and some 110,000 (with 92,000 returning from Pakistan) in 1999. In the year 2000 (until end October) the number of UNHCR assisted returns from Pakistan and Iran is close to double the number compared to previous years with some 75,000 Afghans being assisted to return from Pakistan and some 130,000 Afghans assisted to return from Iran under the Joint Programme for the Voluntary repatriation of Afghans from Iran. Returnees, after verification in the two countries of asylum, receive a standard repatriation-grant comprising of 300 kgs of WFP wheat, a cash grant of US$ 20/person (Iran) and Rupees 5,000/family (Pakistan) as well as plastic-sheeting for temporary shelter at encashment centres inside Afghanistan located in Jalalabad, Khost, Kandahar, Lashkergah and Herat.

In the year 2000, UNHCR's voluntary repatriation operations were characterised not only by a drastic increase in numbers of returnees, namely those returning from Iran without any increase in the organisation's budget, but also by assistance to returnees from Iran with organised in-country transportation from the border to provincial capitals of their places of return and origin. This necessary and very costly operation further limited UNHCR's ability to provide reintegration assistance to the most needy among the returnees in vital sectors such as shelter and potable water. In addition to this change in UNHCR's operations, UNHCR adopted an overall more selective approach to the facilitation of voluntary repatriation by advising against voluntary repatriation to areas severely affected by drought as well as areas of conflict and, in many cases, by not facilitating such returns. While this selective approach will continue to be pursued by UNHCR in 2001, many Afghan refugees might nevertheless feel compelled and determined to return unassisted and spontaneously as is the case during the ongoing year.

In 2001, UNHCR expects to facilitate the voluntary repatriation of an estimated 100,000 refugees from Pakistan and 100,000 Afghan refugees from Iran to Afghanistan. These figures are planning figures and, in the case of Iran, probably constitute a self-imposed limitation given the absorption capacity in Afghanistan as well as expected funding limitations. Overall, UNHCR's policy with regard to voluntary repatriation to Afghanistan remains to facilitate and support the return of Afghan refugees who wish to voluntarily do so based on a fully informed decision on the situation in their areas of origin, but does not encourage or promote voluntary repatriation given the absence of a peaceful settlement of the conflict and ongoing violations of human rights and humanitarian law in Afghanistan.

Objectives of UNHCR's programme in Afghanistan are the following:

- Facilitate the voluntary repatriation in safety and dignity and in accordance with other recognised international standards governing repatriation.
- Provide and share information with the assistance community on the situation of returnees at their places of origin and return, their needs as well as the needs of communities receiving high numbers of returnees through systematic returnee monitoring with a view to support sustainable reintegration.
- Support returnees, preferably at their places of origin, with assistance to meet their immediate needs during an initial period of reintegration and ensure that medium and longer term assistance to returnees and communities receiving high

numbers of returnees are addressed through multi-sectoral and integrated programmes by establishing links to assistance activities aimed at building sustainable livelihoods and providing access to basic social services.

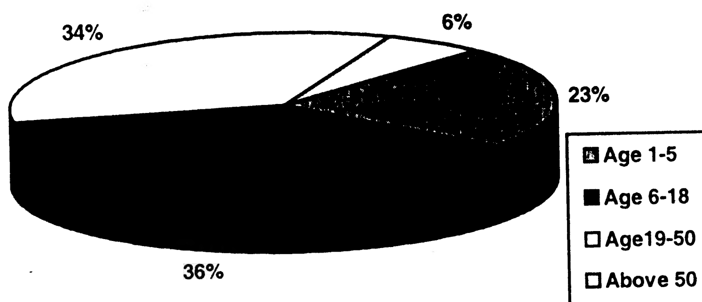
- Contribute to the realisation of basic human rights of returnees, particularly those guaranteed in the declarations of amnesties issued by the parties in Afghanistan through continuous monitoring and awareness-raising.

Protection: One of UNHCR's main tool for protection and programme delivery remains the systematic monitoring of the situation of returnees at their places of origin in Afghanistan. Through this monitoring, UNHCR has been able to generate valuable information on the profile of returnees and their situation after return in Afghanistan. Some 11% of the heads of returnee families who returned in the current year have been interviewed using a questionnaire prepared for the purpose. Summaries of the findings are regularly shared with other agencies and interested parties and are the basis for UNHCR's current and planned assistance and protection interventions. A brief overview on the findings of the returnee monitoring (January to October 2000) is as follows:

Composition of returnee population by gender and age

The returnee population comprises of an equal number of male and female returnees, the overwhelming majority under the age of 18 years (32% male and 29% female returnee children). As for age-groups, the returnees comprise of 12% male and 11% female between 1 and 5 years of age, 20% male and 18% female between 6 and 18 years of age, 17% male and 17% female between 19 and 50 years of age and 4% male and 2% female above 50 years of age and seem to constitute a relatively representative breakdown of Afghan population at large 51% had returned from Pakistan and 49% from Iran. None of those interviewed in the Western region had returned from Pakistan while in all other regions returnees from Pakistan and Iran were found in communities in which returnee monitoring was undertaken. Of the interviewed heads of returnee families, 96% were male heads of household while 4% (148 families) were headed by an Afghan woman. 12% of the returnee families have one or two physically, psychologically or socially vulnerable family members.

Composition of returnee population by age



Composition of returnee population by ethnic origin

As for the ethnic composition of the returnees - with the exception of the Western region where some 83% of the interviewed returnees are of Tajik ethnic origin, - the predominant majority of those returning voluntarily to Afghanistan are of Pashtun ethnic origin, constituting an overall 55% of the returnees (82% of those interviewed who returned from Pakistan and 28% of those returning from Iran), followed by 27% Tajiks (15% of those returning from Pakistan and 85% of those returning from Iran).

Composition of returnee population by ethnic origin